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On Language

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Disinformation
Prep School

THE WHITE HOUSE Family Theater is the room in which the Usual Suspects — a motley assortment of pundits, itinerant authors and editorialists — are assembled on the eve of major occasions to hear The Word from The Man.

In a recent session, the President did not feel the need to dissociate himself from charges of using "disinformation." That word was adopted in 1955 from the Russian *dezinformatsiya*, taken from the name of a division of the K.G.B. devoted to black propaganda. (*Propaganda* is "deceitful persuasion"; *black propaganda* goes beyond that to employ outright lying and concealment of sources.)

The word borrowed back from the Russians was used in a secret memo by Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, the President's national security adviser, as part of a recommendation (never meant to be exposed to public view) of a course of public deception intended to increase the nervous strain on Libya's Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

Disinformation means "the intentional dissemination of lies to the media," and differs from *misinformation* in its intent. Because intentional lying has usually been considered a no-no in the United

States, at least in peacetime, some of those in the White House and State Department wished to put some distance between themselves and the word the national security adviser chose.

In verb prefixes, *mis-* usually means "badly, wrongly"; *dis-* means "the opposite of," reversing the meaning of the word that follows. To *misplace* means to put in the wrong place, to *displace* means to substitute for; to *misbelieve* means to be sure that the truth ain't so, and to *disbelieve* is not to believe a word of it.

Misinformation was probably formed from the verb *misinform*, but the noun *disinformation* took the coinage the other way, back-forming the verb. It seemed only natural for the writer Mort Kondracke to ask, "Did the White House disinform the press?"

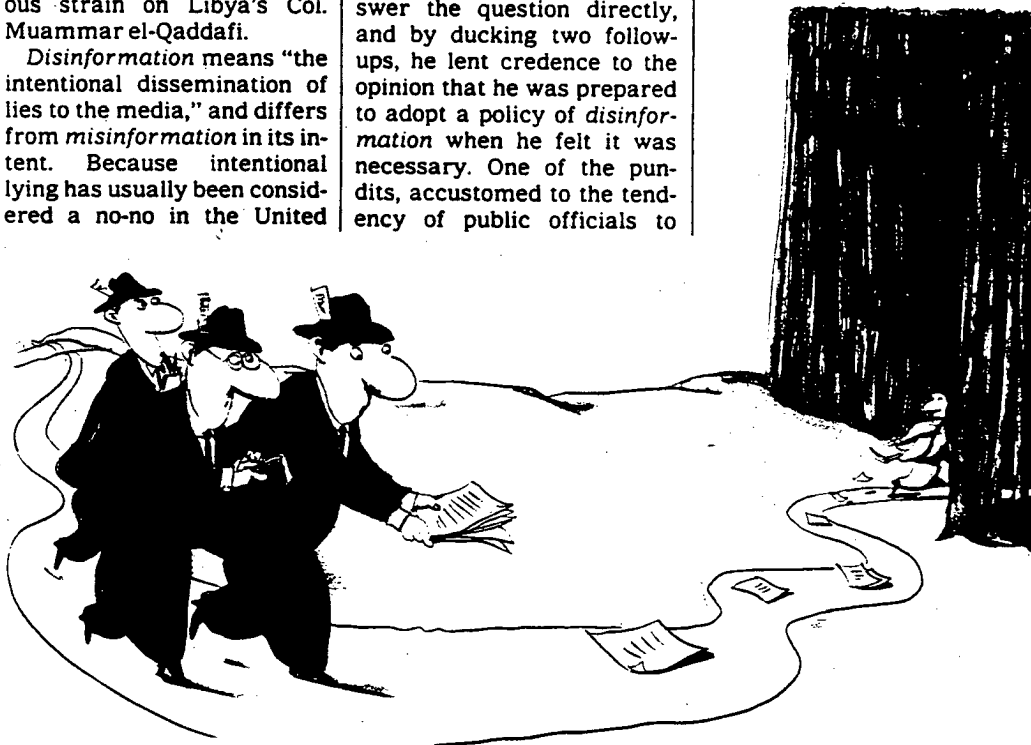
President Reagan seemed to grasp the meaning of the new verb, evidence of its immediate acceptance into the language; by refusing to answer the question directly, and by ducking two follow-ups, he lent credence to the opinion that he was prepared to adopt a policy of *disinformation* when he felt it was necessary. One of the pundits, accustomed to the tendency of public officials to

merely *mislead*, felt this instance went beyond that to become an example of *disleadership*.

Not all Government officials adopted such a cavalier attitude toward official lying; Bernard Kalb, the State Department's top spokesman, resigned on a point of honor rather than associate himself with the word or the practice.

I have long been worried about Vice Admiral Poindexter because of a minor matter that hints at troubles underneath. He has been identified in the persnickety press as head of the National Security Council's "Crisis Preplanning Group," and any bureaucrat who thinks the verb *plan* requires the prefix *pre-* bears watching. (*Preplan* has a 50-year history of being redundant, but is still worth fighting.)

Worse, the name of the group (it's a committee, but *group* sounds more serious) — *crisis preplanning* — sug-



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gests that its task is to "pre-plan" crises. Aren't we supposed to avoid crises? Even if corrected to "Crisis Planning Group," the name sounds provocative, better suited to a K.G.B. "Active Measures Committee." A spokesman for the National Security Council staff refused to confirm or deny the name of the committee, saying only that such information is classified; however, when I asked whether the N.S.C. had dropped the hyphen in spelling the word "preplanning," reluctant permission was given me to "go with that."

I suspect the misnamed Crisis Preplanning Group's function is to be ready with plans in the event that crises arise, at which point another committee, properly called the Crisis Management Group, chaired by the Vice President, is set to spring into inaction. If my supposition is correct, Vice Admiral Poin-dexter's group should call itself the Crisis Contingency Committee (nice alliteration there), the Crisis Aversion Group or the Panic Button Removers.

Please remember that the names of these groups are classified, and I hope the sensitive reader will treat my suggested names with the same confidentiality, lest the language dodge require "damage control." The N.S.C. spends a lot of time on nomenclature, and is especially watchful of acronyms. During the Nixon Administration, for example, Presidential orders were transmitted in National Security Study Memorandums, called NSSM's, pronounced NIS-sims. When the Carter men took over, these papers were renamed, for a single afternoon, Presidential Study Memorandums, until somebody started using the acronym; the situation was tense in the Situation Room until somebody got the authority to change the nomenclature.

Ah, memories; but back to the present. At the same gathering in the Family Theater, the President — who spoke on the record, which meant he could be identified — was followed by a "Senior Administration Official" who can be quoted but not personally identified, according to the rules of background. That struck me as O.K. because the Administration is getting more senior every day and this official's name is frequently confused with the President's.

Senior Administration Official — I like to think of him as "the SAO" — quoted General Secretary Gorbachev as characterizing the mini-summit in Iceland as "a preliminary meeting — in his words, 'a preparatory meeting' — however you wish to pronounce it. I'll leave that to Mr. Safire."

I wish the SAO wouldn't reveal my background presence that way; I'd just as soon readers not know that my brain is subject to the latherings and rinsings of disinformation. At any rate, he pronounced *preparatory* two ways: PREP-ri-tree, and pre-PAR-a-tor-ee, leaving it for me to choose and thereby avoiding derision in case he got it wrong.

The word is correctly pronounced pre-PAR-a-tor-ee, with the accent on the second syllable. Accenting the first syllable may be due to the influence of *preparation*, which is accented on the first and third syllables, or of *prep school*, a shortening of *preparatory school*. If I had made a mistake and said the answer was PREP-ri-tree, I would have been guilty of passing along *misinformation*; if I had wanted to sabotage the SAO, by deliberately giving him the wrong pronunciation to use incorrectly at the summit, that would have been an example of the triumph of *disinformation*. ■